The democratic credentials and institutions of Pakistan are explained as weak because of the division within society between modern secular and traditional religious positions. Today, the society of Pakistan faces the issue of religious extremism. While attempting to identify the causes of violent extremism and the socio-economic conditions, class divisions, and societal inequalities that direct Pakistanis toward extremism and militancy, this article argues that education is the most important solution that will save Pakistani society from the ills of extremism.

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Extremism is a worldwide phenomenon and no nation is free of it. However, the essence of extremism varies from society to society as a result of socio-economic opportunities. In economically rich societies the prospects of extremism will be different. But the threat of extremism becomes serious when society is backward, undeveloped, and illiterate. It is difficult for Pakistan to deal with these matters and issues of terrorism and violence without dealing with extremist thoughts and ideologies. Extremism has spread at various levels to destabilize the country’s social structure and badly damage the peaceful development in each sector. Pakistan has been suffering different forms of extremism such as religious intolerance and ethnic and sectarian violence for some time now.¹

Radicalism has taken profound roots in Pakistani society due to poor administration and lack of equity. However, the investigation into the reasons for radicalism is just limited to the foundations of issues; knowledge regarding the drivers of fanaticism is insufficient. Although issues such as poverty, joblessness, welfare, and illiteracy are significant contributing components, they have not been investigated adequately.² Socio-economic problems combined with ideological extremism provide a fertile ground for violent extremism and terrorism.

In the 1980s Islamization dominated Pakistan’s foreign and domestic policy. Pakistan became the United States’ partner against the Soviet Union in 1979 when the Western forces were supporting traditional political sections against those with leftist inclinations. Pakistan covertly upheld conservative components to restrain the developing impact of liberals and their collaboration with China, the Soviet Union, and communist Islamic nations.³

**Extremism & Socio-Economic Complications in Pakistan**

In today’s world, there is sufficient consciousness of financial problems and societal inequalities. The joblessness rate and expanding poverty has created an environment of insecurity and a feeling of hardship and dissatisfaction, leading the general public toward crimes and intolerance. Pakistan’s culture has distinctive social and linguistic variety, financial imbalances, and class differences. The most powerful factor in society is the strength of the feudal and tribal so-

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cial structure with male-centric and authoritarian patterns. The social manner is formed by these patterns that are evident in a culture of control and restrictive overpower and assets.\(^4\) When basic necessities such as shelter, food, and clothing are not satisfied the state starts to face larger problems, including radicalism. At the point when these issues are not tended to the ideal, they evolve into a danger for the nation. In this world it is difficult to recognize any ideal society; each nation has its own social and economic issues. But Pakistan’s issues are at disturbing levels and has severely escalated in the general public.

Radicalism has taken profound roots in Pakistani society due to poor administration and lack of equity.\(^5\)

Poverty

One of Pakistan’s main issues is poverty. The division of urban and rural poverty patterns are a significant component of Pakistani society. The majority of poor people live in rural areas and do not have access to the necessities of life.\(^5\) Illiteracy, food crises, lack of health facilities, and large family sizes are some of the prevalent aspects of rural poverty.\(^6\) The feelings of hardship lead to fanaticism, shortfall of trust, and self-destruction. Furthermore, poverty encourages illegal terrorization by providing an ethical legitimization. It upholds militant strategies among masses by contributing to disparities and prompting savagery and fanaticism. Radicals use poverty as an instrument to execute their brutal activities to receive support from the general population.

The Class Distinction

The Pakistani people have been divided into the lower, center, or privileged. Because of unequal monetary strategies, the rich become more profligate while the poor become poorer. The class differentiation additionally prompts misuse. The rich class is constantly exploiting the poor class, gathering more wealth at the expense of the poor. Pakistan also faces the issue of overpopulation—the growth rate is high and among the most noteworthy in the world. The rapid growth of the populace has been the main problem and worry for all legislatures, as providing for the necessities of an enormous populace with limited assets is difficult.

\(^5\) International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), see: http://www.ruralpovertyportal.org/web/guess/country/home/tags/pakistan
\(^6\) Ibid.
Bad Governance and Political Instability

Pakistan is fronting issues in governance as well. The poor performance of public institutions paralyzes the country’s administration and leads to economic and political disorder. The government needs to approach societal representatives to successfully address the issues of their communities.

Two things are integral in the governance process: people and performance. People raise their voice for policymakers to fulfill their needs. In democratic countries, the people and the government together play an important role for good governance. If a state is weak, it fails to perform good governance. Good governance allows state institutions to play their role in the enhancement of society,7 in contrast to political leaders and parliamentarians who have lost their credibility among the general population.

Ever since religious extremism emerged, both political and military rule have weakened the strength of Pakistan’s democratic and political institutions. The individual’s involvement in legislative issues is limited, and the state structure does not permit serving the majority rule and their needs. As a result, the majority of the individuals of Pakistan do not abide by the decisions of elites and politicians. They instead search for support from the clan, family, and religious groups, weakening the state and its institutions. State resources and lust for power lead to even some parties receiving the support of extremist groups and being lenient toward these groups. Some extremist groups also take advantage of Pakistan’s weak judicial system. Pakistan has had a weak political system and lack of sincere leadership since Quaid-e-Azam’s death, and has since lost its political track. Lack of leadership and highly incompetent politicians and administrators have damaged the country’s basic foundations and democratic institutions. These reasons have led to the split of society and the consequential weakening of state foundations, creating the vacuum in which terrorism flourishes today.8

Education

Education is the fundamental tool for any society or nation to develop. Education creates knowledge and the capability to deal with the challenges of this globalized world. Just as the state structure, the education system in Pakistan is also weak. The political elites have failed to provide better educational opportunities to the people. The literacy rate is still very low—59 percent—including those who just read

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and write their names in Urdu. Extremist groups exploit the absence of modern education and take young children to their madrassas to impose hate toward other communities. These young children ultimately come out with extremist ideas and a militant mindset, becoming a severe threat to society. The enrollment ratio of students at the primary level has shown a decreasing trend. In fact, approximately 50 percent of children do not even complete their primary education. The lack of education and high illiteracy rate has made Pakistan vulnerable to extremism and terrorism. Technical education in particular is very important especially in the rural regions of the country. The system suffers from insufficient investment in the education sector, institutional incapability, and the poor curriculum that often provokes intolerance.

“Ever since religious extremism emerged, both political and military rule have weakened the strength of Pakistan’s democratic and political institutions.”

The Afghan War

Throughout history, Pakistan-Afghan relations have confronted different ups and downs and the absence of common trust and mutual understanding. Pakistan needs harmony and peace at any expense, as Pakistan has been the nation affected most from the Afghan war. Pakistan has indeed welcomed displaced Afghans during the various intercessions of foreign forces; however, Pakistan faces numerous internal security issues now. The huge presence of Afghan refugees has led to internal insecurity and financial issues for the state. Pakistan’s international strategy toward Afghanistan is dependent on the end of the civil war, its harmony, cultural improvement, and the foundation of a strong government that includes every single Afghan stakeholder. External interference in Afghanistan in 1979 during the USSR occupation extremely damaged Pakistan’s stability, causing an enormous increase in militancy, weaponization, and drug trafficking in Pakistan.

9/11 and Its Impacts on Pakistan

The prolonged global reflection on Islamic militancy after 11 September 2001, and, specifically, the US invasion of Afghanistan has had a transformative impact on Pakistan and its homegrown invaders. General Musharraf was among the

first remote pioneers to have received a clarion call from Washington: “You are either with us or against us” was the message. In addition to its political history already embroiled in endemic crises and challenges that no other country has ever experienced, Pakistan faced a set of different troubles, both internal and external, with the tragedies of 9/11. After 9/11, the scars of the American-headed war on terror have been concretely observable in Pakistan.

**Role of Saudi Arabia and Iran in Spreading Radical Islam**

According to Professor Vali Nasr, the main basis of funding to export the radical image of Islam is Saudi Arabia. Several organizations have been established to promote the radical version of Islam across the Muslim world; these groups take huge financial sustenance to spread their extremist version and interpretation of Islam. The refugees from Afghanistan who came to Pakistan due to the bloody war in their own country were re-located to refugee camps set up in Pakistan. During the Cold War, the US and Saudi Arabia supported schools within these camps, as they provided a way to continue recruits for the US-backed Afghan opposition against the Soviets. Although the importance of religious schools for Western powers decreased after the end of the war, Saudi Arabia continued its funding, therefore, the number of religious schools has increased.

Saudi Arabia is the most important country in the Muslim world; its strong influence is felt in both regional and global affairs. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran have different approaches and policies toward many regional issues. These two countries have a kind of rivalry that stems from their objectives, powers, and interests in the Muslim world. Unfortunately, their policies badly affect the societal circles and stability within Muslim countries. Pakistan has also been affected by these policies that promote religious extremism and sectarianism within its borders. According to WikiLeaks reports, former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that Saudi Arabia is the largest source of funds for extremist groups in Pakistan, but the Saudi government is reluctant to cut the financial support for these groups, including the Taliban. The report further states that some other Arab countries also provide source of funding for militant and extremist groups. The most ignored factor in the conflict between Pakistan and Afghanistan is that the violence is partly supported by the Arab conservatives whose

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governments do nothing to cut their funds.\textsuperscript{15} Washington is critical of Saudi Arabia’s refusal to ban such funds in the name of charities; intelligence suggests that these groups continue to provide financial support and fund extremism overseas.\textsuperscript{16}

\begin{quote}
\textit{The lack of education and high illiteracy rate has made Pakistan vulnerable to extremism and terrorism.}
\end{quote}

Since the Islamic revolution in Iran, there have been many ups and downs in Pakistan-Iran relations. These unstable relations were cultivated by the sectarian violence of the Taliban groups. As a result, sectarian violence was carried out by the different extremist groups within Pakistan against Iranian interests. Pakistan has become the playground for Iran-Saudi proxy wars. These two countries are supporting their respective groups on a sectarian basis for their interests and expansionism, which is consequently damaging the pluralistic and peaceful societal structure in Pakistan. Pakistan and Iran have differences over the Afghan conflict: while Pakistan supported the Taliban government in Afghanistan, Iran opposed it.\textsuperscript{17}

Although they both feel their common interest in the Afghan issue has been realized after the collapse of the Taliban regime, Pakistan and Iran have yet to cooperate on top policy issues. For example, Pakistan has security concerns about the growing role of India in neighboring regions, especially the Indo-Iranian joint projects regarding Afghanistan’s infrastructure and development. The expansion of Indian consulates in Zahedan near the Pakistan border is also viewed as a concern and worry in Islamabad.\textsuperscript{18}

Yet, the fundamental component in building friendly relations between Pakistan and Iran are the people-to-people interactions between those whom share a common cultural heritage and history. To strengthen further relations it is important to respect and understand each other’s interests and cooperate accordingly. Academics, exchange of programs, and joint research programs are some of the areas Pakistan and Iran must cooperate.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Religious extremism and terrorism were present in our society well before the

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
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United States entered Afghanistan. Pakistan was struggling with religious extremism and extremist groups of different sects well before 9/11. This struggle continues today, as hate-filled, prejudiced, and misogynistic speeches and preaching of religious leaders continue to increase religious extremism and intolerance in Pakistani society. Everyone considers it as their responsibility to judge others’ piety; this self-assumed mentality puts the lives of ordinary people in danger.

In addition to the instability and poor performance of political parties, the unequal distribution of power and resources from the center to provinces contributes to political instability. Moreover, since countries that lack resources are not able to deal with multi-ethnic societies, political instability becomes a big hurdle for nation-building in developing and underdeveloped countries. Democracy is failing due to the political chaos and volatility in third world countries. Different interests and pressure groups are fighting each other for power and their political objectives.

The performance of religious political parties in elections throughout the history of Pakistan has been poor. However, the failure of mainstream political parties in revitalizing politics, economics, and society, and hopes of establishing an Islamic order and a system of justice and equality attracted some people to the religious forces. Yet, people are increasingly becoming wary of sectarian violence, confrontational politics, intolerant attitudes, and the militant tendencies of religious segments of society.

**Recommendations**

Extremism, which creates instability, is an important issue in every society and country. Extremism has different forms such as religious, political, and sectarian, which has become the most important threat for the state of Pakistan. The Pakistani Government therefore needs to

- understand and define the nature and repercussions of extremism;
- differentiate the militant groups according to their agendas;
- improve the capabilities of armed forces;
- arrange youth development programs.

The conservative elites and clergy whom have a strong influence in Pakistan have never encouraged the growth of a liberal democratic culture and its institutions. Any counter-terrorism policy or peaceful and progressive culture can only succeed and be sustained if liberal values such as freedom of expression, individualism, and moderation are allowed to flourish in the country. Both print and digital media should encourage interfaith dialogues for sectarian harmony and tolerance.
As a result, the Pakistani Government also needs to

- prioritize fighting extremism;
- strengthen democratic institutions;
- work for a pluralistic and progressive society;
- balance the relationship between religion and state like the Turkish model;
- improve the educational curriculum and execute radical reforms;
- develop the agriculture sector;
- play a constructive role regarding the Afghan issue;
- pressurize the US and the Afghan governments to limit the Indian role in Afghanistan;
- implement administrative and political reforms in the tribal region.

According to Professor Ömer Taşpınar, social and economic development is an important and basic requirement for democratization, noting educational and economic empowerment as the best solution against extremism.\(^{19}\) Disappointment also causes violent terrorism, as any individual who is not satisfied with their ruling leaders and realizes that his rights are not fulfilled diverges toward any organization in hope for a better life. In addition to the lack of quality and modern education, limited economic opportunities make an ordinary person a target for extremist groups. Education is therefore the most important solution that will rescue the nation from these ills.